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ABSTRACT

Fred Rogers, creator and host of the television program "Mister Roger's Neighborhood," believes strongly in several propositions concerning the healthy development and education of young children. These ideas include the following: (1) to grow up to be healthy, very young children do not need to know how to read, but they do need to know how to play; (2) no matter how helpful computers are as tools, they do not compare to a teacher-child relationship which is human and mutual; (3) there is a great difference between insisting on someone's doing something and establishing an atmosphere in which that person can grow into wanting to do it; and (4) appropriate television experiences can have an extremely beneficial impact on children. (RH)

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TURNING CARING INTO ACTION

Fred M. Rogers
Creator and host of
"Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"

Hogg Foundation for Mental Health
The University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78713-7998
1989

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The Conference of Southwest Foundations is the oldest association of foundations and trust funds in the United States. It has approximately 150 members from seven southwestern states and includes family and private foundations, corporate and community foundations, and bank trust departments that have responsibility for philanthropic trusts. The annual meetings in 1988, at which Fred Rogers was a speaker, were the fortieth anniversary meetings of the conference and were held May 11-13 in Corpus Christi, Texas.

"Far and beyond any money
that you contribute in your life,
the greatest gift you ever give
is your honest self."

Foreword

The closing luncheon of the annual meeting of the Conference of Southwest Foundations is always one of the high points of that event. Each year the Program Committee gives a great deal of time and thought to the selection of that final session's speaker. The assignment is not an easy one—a person who can speak to all the different agendas that conference participants hold and do so in a way that is uplifting, forward thinking, and empowering—at a time when they are conference-weary and already thinking about home. It seemed for a while that the members of the Program Committee for the 1988 meetings were almost paralyzed in their brainstorming process. For what seemed an enormous amount of time, they sat around the planning table and, literally, no one came up with a name.

Then, one member spoke up. "You may all think that I am crazy, but what about Fred Rogers?" There was a brief moment of silence and then it seemed as if a current of electricity had shot through the group. Suddenly everyone was talking, smiling, exclaiming. "What a wonderful idea!" "How can we get him?" "If he comes, I'm bringing my children." "Do you think he'll wear his sweater?" Several weeks later, Fred Rogers' acceptance was confirmed and the Program Committee members were confident that the final session would be a high point of the meetings.

On Friday, May 13, 1988, Fred M. Rogers, creator and host of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, spoke to the assembled

members (and not a small number of related children) on the topic of "Turning Caring into Action." Immediately after he completed his remarkable address, the representatives from the Hogg Foundation made eye contact with one another and simultaneously said, "Let's see if we can publish it."

Thus, a little over a year later, we are able to share Fred Rogers' thoughts with a much larger audience than was fortunate to be present that day. It is never quite possible to capture in written word the energy, the sensitivity that the spoken word conveys. With Fred's talk that problem was even more difficult because one of the most moving aspects of his presentation was the showing of a taped portion of one of his programs. However, with the permission of the Family Communications, Inc. officers, we have attempted to translate that segment into written word. Marion Coleman, executive associate at the Hogg Foundation, transcribed that segment of the speech with the thoughtful guidance of Fred Rogers and Bill Isler, vice president of Family Communications, Inc.

Fred Rogers seldom agrees to speak to groups, prioritizing the needs of children far above the desires of curious adults. Thus, we are grateful he made the time to create these important thoughts to share with the Conference members in person and, ultimately, to share with other caring individuals in print.

TURNING CARING INTO ACTION

Do you ever wonder if you've made a difference in this life; whether any of those people organizations who have come to you for help have remembered *anything* you did for them—any ways you cared for them?

Thirty-five years ago, my wife and I moved from New York City (where I had just given up my job as a network floor manager) to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where I was going to help start the first community-sponsored television station in the country. I went from the splendor and excitement of managing the "Voice of Firestone" and "The Hit Parade" and "NBC Opera Theatre" to a place that wasn't even on the air yet!

November, 1953. . . .I'll never forget it. My professional television friends thought I was foolish—but, like you, I saw promise in little things. I wanted to help make a difference—a good difference—in the lives of people who watched television.

I had always been interested in children, maybe because I was an "only child" until I was eleven. So I had to make up whatever brothers and sisters (permanent playmates) I had. I think, even more likely, I've been interested in children because my parents and grandparents—my early teachers—really valued childen. For them, children were to seen *and* heard. And what we said and thought mattered to them. I think that's a main reason why I've been able to spend so much of my professional life working for families with young children and feel good about it. Naturally, I wonder about your early caregivers and how they helped you become who you are.

Isn't it amazing how much we bring of who we've been to whatever we do today? For instance, when we watch television, we watch and listen with our whole being. Everything we've been through—all the joys, all the sadnesses, all the fears. . .are with us.

I know of a little boy whose family had been forced to sell its home and move to another state where work was more plentiful. That child was watching television with a friend one day just as he was about to move. And on the television was an animated short about a house blowing away and a young character standing near the house saying how sad he was. Well, the real little boy who was watching all this got quite sad himself and he said, "That's just like me; I don't have any home."

Now the people who produced that television short didn't know that particular little boy would be watching and would feel that way when he saw that animated house blowing away. What those people *could* be sure of, though, was that whatever feelings their viewers had about their houses, those feelings would be brought into the drama of the television program about the house blowing away.

The letters that we receive reflect the impact of timing, also. Some parents write to tell us that a certain program came at just the right time for their child. In fact, they sometimes react as if we had consciously made that program for them because it fit their child so well. Many parents have written to tell us how helpful our program about the death of a goldfish has been in their families. On the other hand, if a program arouses feelings for the child that the mother or father isn't ready to respond to themselves, those parents can be very forbidding and may write to us with quite a bit of anger. One mother last month said she'd never let her children watch our program again because I mentioned divorce, and she didn't want her children to think about divorce since she, herself, had been divorced when they were too young to know about it. Well, I feel sorry for that mother and those children because there are some things that must be mentioned in order to be managed well. Not that I'm an advocate for hurrying children. I'm certainly not. For instance, there are some powerful adult impulses like sex

which children at early ages aren't ready to understand. No matter how much one might try to explain it, I don't think that very young children are developmentally prepared to integrate explicit sexual education in their early development.

I feel the same way about the great rush to force very young children to pack their world into little categories to learn all of our adult symbols before they've had the chance for unencumbered play. *To grow up to be healthy, very young children do not need to know how to read, but they do need to know how to play.* It's as simple (and complex) as that: encouraging a child to use what he or she is given in playful, creative, unique ways is one major aid in the development of problem-solving skills.

Before narrowing a concept of "cat" down to three black marks (*c/a/t*) on a page of paper, I would much rather see a child get to know as many cats as possible, get to respect them for their grace and their independence, grow to know that they have feelings, that they need food and water, that each one is different, that they get tired and they sleep and they need to be loved. Children need to catch the idea that their relationships with cats . . . or dogs . . . or flowers . . . or rivers . . . and especially people are the most important things in all their lives.

Lest you wonder if I'm against reading and books, I must tell you that I would much rather spend an evening reading a book than almost anything else. In fact, a superb program for well-baby clinics in Pittsburgh is called "Beginning with Books," and in it trained storytellers help parents and children develop an early love for books, not with the purpose of forcing the babies to learn to read, but allowing them the early joy of being read to. There's a world of difference between insisting on someone's doing something and establishing an atmosphere in which that person can grow into wanting to do it!

I know of a little boy who was extremely curious. That boy's father was harsh in his criticism of his son's curiosity, so

much so that that boy transferred his affection to his uncle. His uncle was a very accepting person who really cared for the boy. In fact, he told him that it was all right to wonder about things, to be curious and to look and listen carefully. Of course, he helped him to understand limits, but he recognized the appropriateness of a five-and-a-half year old's curious nature.

Just before that little boy started to first grade, his beloved uncle died suddenly. From then on, that little boy had trouble learning. It was as if he couldn't even look at things actively enough to have them mean anything to him. He couldn't look actively enough even to learn to read. He was an intelligent child, but his own life drama had reinforced the fact that active looking was naughty, and, what's more, if you advocated it (as his uncle did), it was very dangerous. It could kill you.

Well, that boy had some very sensitive, gifted, caring teachers who, with a lot of patience and a lot of special help and work, were able to offer him the gift of safe, active looking—a gift which has made all the difference in the world in releasing that child's natural abilities.

Of course, the changes in that young boy's growing didn't happen overnight. Losing trust is a frightful thing. And regaining it must come through an atmosphere of love—no other way but through love.

In our Orwellian age, more and more children are being exposed to fancier and fancier machinery. Many schools are using computers in their children's daily routines. No matter how helpful they are as tools (and, of course, they can be very helpful tools), computers don't begin to compare in significance to the teacher-child relationship which is human and mutual. A computer can help you learn to spell "hug," but it can never know the risk or the joy of actually giving or receiving one.

Do any of you remember the telecasts of Leonard Bernstein's young people's concerts? Well, I know a man who, as a young boy, watched those concerts every week. There were no musicians in his family, but he was so drawn to those telecasts and so impressed by Mr. Bernstein's love for his art, that that young boy said to himself, "I'm going to be like that." And his desire was so strong that he actually became a conductor. The night I met him a few years ago, he was conducting at the Kennedy Center in Washington. A huge chorus and orchestra were performing the magnificent Mass of Leonard Bernstein. That young conductor is John Mauceri, and he'll tell you—as he told me—that it's thanks to television and Leonard Bernstein that he's conducting today.

That's the kind of thing that can happen when somebody who loves what he or she is doing, shows that love in front of children, and the children are inspired to want to do it, too.

It's no secret that I like to get to know people—and not just the outside stuff of their lives. I like to try to understand the meaning of who people are and what they're saying to me.

Children are sometimes guarded when they meet me. I've heard some say, "How did he get out of the TV?" But often they're very forthright in their talk with me. I remember the first time I met Jeff Erlanger. It was in a restaurant in Washington. Jeff was five years old, and his parents had brought him from their home in Wisconsin. Jeff had had some very difficult surgery that had left him with physical handicaps. Nevertheless, he had a wonderful twinkle in his eyes, and we had a lovely visit in that restaurant. Well, that was quite a few years ago, and we have kept in touch ever since. In fact, when I learned that Jeff had gotten a new wheelchair—an electric one—I asked if he'd like to come to the neighborhood and show our "television friends" how he could work it.

I've had many memorable moments that I've been able to share with people through television, but the day that Jeff

came was one of the best for me. Just before we taped I said to him, "I think you know how much I like you, Jeff. I'd like my neighbors to meet you. You can show them how well you handle that chair and talk about anything you want, and let's sing 'It's You I Like' together." He said "Sure," and we started to tape.

There is no way for me to capture adequately with the written word the remarkable, unique spirit that is Jeff. Nevertheless, I want to share that visit with you.

My television friends and I had just left the Neighborhood of Make Believe and I was sitting on the windowseat when I heard Jeff call my name from outside. I walked out on the porch and there was Jeff sitting in his wheelchair by the steps. I walked over to him and sat down on the top step.

"Heh, Jeff! How are you? I'm glad to see you. Thank you for coming by."

I turned to my television friends and explained, "This is my friend Jeff Erlanger. He's one of my neighbors here, and I asked him if he would come by today because I wanted you to meet him and I wanted you to see his electric wheelchair."

And then to Jeff I said, "We've been talking about electric cars and all kinds of electric things this week. Would you show me how you make your chair go?"

"O.K. Sure!" Jeff's small hand reached to the control box on the left arm of the chair. His fingers, wrapped in a metal brace, touched a lever as he matter-of-factly explained, "Well, first, this is the on and off switch and I move this to turn it on. And . . ." His tiny hand moved the switch to the right and the chair slowly backed up, turned around, and moved down the sidewalk. He rounded the corner and announced, "And then . . ." moving the chair around and guiding it back to the steps.

As he neared the porch steps again, I commented, "You're really good at that."

"Thanks."

"That's a very fancy machine."

"Thank you."

"But you're the one who makes it go!"

"Correct," he confirmed.

"Did it take a long time to learn how?"

"No, not really. I have had other wheelchairs. My first electric wheelchair only took me about a day to learn to use."

"Gee, that's wonderful. Jeff, your mother and dad must be really proud of you."

He nodded and smiled, "I'm sure they are."

"Well, I know I am. Can you tell my friends what it is that made you need this wheelchair?"

"Sure. Well, when I was about seven months old, I had a tumor, and it broke the nerve that tells my hands and legs what to do. And they tried to cut the tumor but they couldn't get it and I became handicapped." Jeff nodded thoughtfully and then added, "And I got a wheelchair when I was four years old."

"That was your first one?"

"Uh huh." Jeff grinned.

"When you were four?"

"Yeah."

"Do you remember that?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"You must have some mighty good doctors who've been taking care of you."

"Uh huh."

"Can you tell me any of your doctors' names?"

"Yeah. I have a pediatrician, Dr. Henson, who works in St. Mary's Hospital. Then at U.W. the bone doctor is Dr. Reed who takes care of," Jeff hesitated and then laughingly continued, "the bones I guess. Cause he's a bone doctor! Anyway, I had surgery earlier this summer. I had a pain in my stomach call autonomic dysreflexia and . . ."

"What was that?"

"Autonomic dysreflexia. I'm not sure what it means."

"But you sure can say it."

"Yeah!" Jeff agreed smiling and continued. "Anyway, so I had surgery done just recently to try to cut the sphincter holding my urine in." Jeff stopped a moment and then looked up brightly. "So I have a lot of things going on in here. Which just shows you that you have a lot of things happening to you most of the time when you're handicapped." And then Jeff quickly added, "And sometimes that happens when you're not handicapped."

"But you're able to talk about this so well."

"Yeah."

"And help other people who might have the same kind of things."

"Uh huh."

"Do you know that song I sometimes sing called 'It's You I Like'?"

"Uh huh."

"I'd like to sing that for you and with you."

"Sure."

I began:

It's you I like.
It's not the things you wear.
It's not the way you do your hair
But it's you I like.
Jeff joined in:
The way you are right now
The way down deep inside you
Not the things that hide you.
Not your fancy chair (I added and we smiled)
That's just beside you.

But it's you I like.
Every part of you.
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings
Whether old or new.
I hope that you'll remember
Even when you're feeling blue
That it's you I like.
It's you yourself!
It's you
It's you I like!

"And it is you I like, Jeff."

"Thanks!"

"And there must be times when you do feel blue?"

"Uh huh."

"What do you do during those times?"

"Well, it depends."

"Sometimes, do you make up stories?"

"Yeah."

"Or read?"

"Yeah."

"Or play?"

"Yes." Jeff's expression had grown more thoughtful as I added each idea.

"I know that's what I did when I was a little boy and . . ."

"Did it help?"

"It *did* help. Does it help you?"

"Yeah."

"We all have to discover our own ways, don't we, of doing things when we're feeling blue?"

"Uh huh."

"I'm not feeling blue right now though."

Jeff grinned, "Me neither." And we both laughed.

"I'm so glad you came today."

"Thanks."

"Thank you. And I hope you'll come back again. And will you give your mom and dad my best? They are sure great people."

"Sure."

"Bye bye, Jeff."

"Bye bye."

"I'll watch you as you go."

I waved as Jeff once again carefully manuevered his chair down the sidewalk. Then I turned and went back in the house and sat on the floor. As I cleaned up the blocks I had built with earlier, I shared my thoughts about Jeff with my television friends.

"I was just thinking. For all of Jeff's physical problems, he's such a competent boy. He has learned so much because his mom and dad love him and he loves them. They've learned together. That's what learning is all about, isn't it? A lot of it has to do with love. Jeff is certainly able to talk about his worries. He's able to talk about anything. It's really great to have a friend like that."

And it was wonderful to share Jeff with the children who watch the program. Jeff has recently graduated from high school, and he's deciding now what he'll do next. I'm inspired by his very being. Repeatedly his parents have written and told me through the years how enriching television has been in Jeff's life.

I know a university professor who, on graduation day every year, watches the procession of the senior class, and when he sees his particular students about to graduate, he wonders to himself, "Did I teach them what was really helpful and true? Will they remember any of it? Will they be able to use anything I was able to give them to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others?"

Do you ever feel that way?

As you go about your tasks of granting funds to people of organizations who have their determination letters from the IRS, do you ever wonder if what you're offering is going to make a difference in the big picture of things? Well, I know I do sometimes.

Not knowing all of the drama that each child brings to his or her television viewing, I sometimes wonder if what I'm offering that day is as appropriate as it might be. But I have to trust the fact that I've worked as well and as honestly as I know how; and, I need to remember that to be a positive contributor to children's development does not mean to be a perfect person, because the children in their own imperfection will keep on loving and trusting us adults who do our best to be supportive in their growing.

And isn't that what you try to do in your grant making—try your best to be supportive of your grantees' healthy growth and development? You're like mothers and fathers and like this television neighbor: you want the best for your world, and you're doing what you can with what you have to make it the healthiest possible place for generations to come.

But it's not easy—not by any means. I know a very wealthy woman. She has told me she hates to answer the phone or open her mail because 99 percent of the time she knows she's going to be asked to give money. The worst thing, she says, is to be invited to lunch and know that at some moment the host is going to press her for a contribution. And she lives with that every day of her life. Of course, she can easily fall into the trap of wondering whether the only worth she has is measured in dollars.

But my friend has a keen wit and a great sense of whimsy, and she has some close buddies who love her for what's inside of herself rather than what's inside of her checkbook. And, of course, that's what makes the difference—the people you love and the people who love you; that's what always makes the biggest difference.

And what's more: my friend knows she has a responsibility to be a steward of what she's been given, so she works hard at it, and she pays other people to help her manage it. She knows she can't satisfy all the desires of those who want her financial help, but she can translate some of the care she has inside of herself to action on the outside. Just because she has a lot of money doesn't mean she doesn't have a job. She has a big job, and she brings the whole drama of her life to the doing of that job.

Just like you! You bring all you ever were and are to any relationship you have today.

Far and beyond any money that you contribute in your life, the greatest gift you ever give is your honest self. Whoever helped you to become a caring person has great cause for joy. Wherever they may be—here or in Heaven—I trust they're feeling real pride in what you do for so many.

I wish you well as you continue to turn caring into action; and, on behalf of the children of our world who really are the ultimate beneficiaries of your vision, I give you thanks.

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